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# The Gender Perspective in Managing Knowledge through Cross-Curricular Studies in Higher Education\*

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## Abstract

This article investigates how universities, as transmitters of social awareness, should reflect the problem of inequality between the sexes in educational processes. It should also reflect gender studies in managing knowledge through cross-curricular studies. The European Higher Education Area has been emphasizing the need to encourage “transverse” or cross-curricular competences, primarily those relating to citizenship skills. In this context, it is evident that the twenty-first century should constitute a historical period fundamental to the process of acquisition social and legal rights for women under conditions of equality with men.

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## 1. Introduction

It is undeniable that gender matters have received a considerable boost in all areas of social life, the first reflection of this having been the general attention paid by lawmakers to topics linked to equality between the sexes. Equality between men and women is presented as a basic principle and fundamental right within the legal framework of the European Union. Ever since the Treaty of Amsterdam came into force in 1999, the equality of women and men and the elimination of inequalities between them have been an objective that must be included in all policies and actions adopted by member states. Similarly, there has been a generalized growth in awareness of the blot on society constituted by gender violence, and of the fact that legal responses have not kept match with judicial and social realities. As it is, equality before the law, which represents a great historical achievement for women and for society

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as a whole, has proved insufficient to attain real equality. Much has been achieved, but unfortunately modern-day society still has in it models of behaviour that highlight imbalances that continue to exist. Universities, as transmitters of social awareness, have reflected this theme in their educational procedures, with gender studies present in the management of knowledge through cross-curricular studies. It is true that society has before it the great challenge of uprooting certain stereotypes and promoting the conditions needed for equality between women and men to be real and effective. This is the reason for the decisive role that universities should play as motors of change in society through three fundamental strands: education, research and innovation.

## **2. The Gender Perspective in the University Context**

The various pieces of work on this topic that are listed in the references at the end of this article offer abundant evidence to show that the reality about gender is that there are obvious inequalities and imbalances, linked to social and cultural factors. The eradication of such inequalities is an aim pursued from all sections of society, but especially by universities to the extent that ethical, moral and legal motives, along with reasons of efficiency have led their influence and social impact to become a benchmark for others.

It is clear that one of the contexts in which inequality and the exclusion of women can and must be fought is the sphere of education. Education constitutes a privileged area for encouraging critical thought about these topics and a fertile field for reconstructing conceptions of gender. On these lines, it seems undeniable that universities are valued as the institutions of higher education par excellence. On this basis, ever since the creation of the European Higher Education Area there has been an insistence that universities should guarantee an education that is not just academic, but also stresses the training element; an innovatory education bringing with it the transmission of values (Pérez Sedeño, 2008; Santamaría Conde, 2005). This ethical commitment, emphasized and demanded at a European level, in the first instance concerns the governing bodies of universities as an institution at the service of society. This means that there should be debate and clarification of the educational model that will define certain particular moral and professional values in its project for teaching and learning. This implies a change in the culture of university teaching towards what should be the fundamental objectives of European universities in the twenty-first century, which include education, training and research, but also involve an overall integrated training of students, the production of competent professionals; in brief, training as citizens. This has been echoed in laws that have been passed one after another over recent years and that allow a judgement to be reached about the level of commitment in educational policies to encouraging teaching about the range and significance of equality in higher education.

These legislative measures, not only at a national, but also at a regional, level in Spain, some of them with general provisions, others with more specific contents, have had parallels in a number of public institutions like universities. These, or at least a good number of them, have drawn up, or are drawing up, their own equality plans. In addition, many private enterprises have started looking at how to integrate new requirements in the area of equality or the also relatively recent actions aimed at reconciling work and family life, into the running of their activities. This is what occurred in the past with measures relating to health and safety in the workplace, to prevention of work risks, or to respect for the environment.

Thus, it is undeniable that the topic of gender has had an impact on all areas of social life. Similarly, it seems evident that these attempts by legislative policy to ensure the effective equality of men and women, or to make it more visible, have been accompanied by a notable boost in recent years to women's studies, which have taken various different approaches, but have also vigorously addressed the new area created in the field of research. Hence, whilst it is not possible to say that gender studies are a novelty with regard to what was already happening in the late 1990s (Flecha, 1999), it is true that problems, arising essentially from violence against women (Valmaña, 2010 a and b), from situations of real inequality (Domínguez, 2010; Pacheco, 2010), or from the difficulties of reconciling work and family life, have led to the situation being outlined here.

Given this state of affairs, the crucial question now is: "Has a gender perspective struck deep roots in the world of universities?"

Recent years have witnessed a generalized raising of awareness of the stigma constituted by gender violence and the mistreatment of the young or of the elderly, and the legal response to these, which does not fully match up to social realities. As transmitters of social awareness, universities have echoed these topics in their educational processes, with gender studies being reflected in the management of knowledge through cross-curricular studies. The bringing

in of new syllabuses within the framework of the European Higher Education Area, as was pointed out by Valmaña et al. (2011), triggered new expectations in respect of the inclusion of gender studies in university courses. The possibility arose of bringing in subjects or materials linked to gender in the new programmes. It was thus understood that women's studies, or in a wider sense gender studies, could take a place as an important part of education. The aim of including them in most cases was related to concepts of social awareness raising and the teaching of principles or values of equality between the sexes. Sometimes the inspiration was clearly feminist, as had been habitual in gender studies overall (García de León, 1999). The vehicles or means that it was intended to use, according to these scholars, were various. On the one hand, there were gender subjects that, if included in the core course category, would have a clear cross-curricular component. On the other, there were specific subjects with contents relating to studies about women that would be present at all stages in degree programmes, with a generally optional status. Finally, there were subjects that were already in existence and consolidated with a gender perspective. However, what might be defined as the highest aspiration, the inclusion of an obligatory cross-curricular subject common to all degree programmes, has yet to arrive in many universities. The three routes chosen, cross-curricular subjects, optional subjects and contents about woman within ordinary subjects (gender perspective) also correspond to different approaches and methodologies. It might even be said that they correspond to different sets of ideological presuppositions. Reality as it stands after the approval and implementation of new European-style degree programmes makes it plain that in general only optional subjects have been brought in that have any gender content or profile.

It is true that demands were made for a legal provision that syllabuses must include the principles of equality, of non-discrimination by reason of sex, and the like, that would justify these subjects. However, as Saldaña (2010) indicates, it would seem that these have been addressed in most degree programme proposals merely by including them as declarations of principles of a generic type, or by incorporating them as one or another of the general competences that should be acquired by students. Acceptance of this sort of inclusion has led to differing opinions, some saying that what is included is really very little, others stating that it is more than enough, yet others taking the always pragmatic view that no more than this can be done. However, the areas where gender subjects have had most of a showing have been master's degrees, mostly postgraduate specialist qualifications accredited locally but not nationally and, of course, conferences, seminars or workshops in which the topic is women, especially new problems and situations arising from the various pieces of legislation that have been brought in over recent years.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten, as Tamayo-Haya (2011) points out, that universities have been seen as an environment favourable towards equality, since both access and promotion are governed by principles of merit and ability. However, it has then been shown that even within them there are considerable amounts of inequality, arising unconsciously in the best case, the outcome of the deep-seated prejudices, traditions and practices of males in the public sphere. Various diagnostic studies (Palomar Barea, 2005) have shown that there is a process of feminization of university enrolments. Nevertheless, a deeper look shows that, as happens elsewhere in Europe, there still remain courses and specializations where the traditional division of roles persists. Despite the equilibrium between women and men as students, there is no increased participation by women in decision-making bodies. Although women achieve better marks, universities do not seem to set much value on the fact when selecting or promoting staff. There are still comparatively few women who manage to make the leap to a professorship, and even fewer who reach posts of responsibility. In this way, the scope of contributions from female academics and all the creative potential of women is trammelled by the limited place they have in the contexts in which university policies are decided (Ballarín Domingo, 2009). This is made worse by their greater responsibilities in family and domestic matters and the interruptions to their working careers for reproductive reasons at certain stages in women's lives. These constitute key factors when choosing and developing a professional trajectory, which in turn leads to greater pressures, hindering their access to posts of greater responsibility. This is not remedied by any positive counter-actions that might reduce the inequality gap that arises from this persistent inequitable distribution of tasks. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that there is little consolidation of gender studies in mainstream educational programmes.

In fact, there is a need for interdisciplinary integrated training that would address the increasing interest triggered by the urgent problem of violence in contexts of the family, work and education. This requires to be handled by specialist professionals, competent to work in these areas. Lecturers go deeper into fields that outstrip their original degree specializations, benefiting from collaboration with research teams. This form of learning lead to a teaching method that becomes more and more finely tuned and richer for teachers, which in turn favours the integration of

contents and team work for students, the possibility of debate between disciplines and the formation of research and work teams in certain subject areas, as proposed by Valmaña (2010). Methods of team teaching and learning are just as important for the professional futures of students as they are for teachers, specifically in disciplines which are mixed and merged and require the participation of various different sorts of professionals when attempting to prevent or resolve a case of gender violence.

Consequently, as an outcome of what was described above, efforts to incorporate these new forms of knowledge into academic structures has had as a result a wider and wider range of courses at tertiary level. These include master's degrees and other postgraduate qualifications, degrees accredited by individual universities though not nationally, numerous courses run thanks to assistance from the Spanish Institute for Women, equality offices and observatories, equality plans, or an ever-increasing number of doctoral theses (Larumbe, 2012). However, the results have not been as hoped. Apart from some advances noted above, thanks to arguments based on cross-curricular studies as a reason for not including very specific subjects, on the basis that they should be present throughout the entire structure of qualifications, they have not achieved much of a break-through into scientific degrees and continue to be confined mostly to Humanities and Social Sciences. Most degree programme proposals incorporate a gender perspective by referring to the resources available to the university, but make no reference to it in the description of the objectives and skills included or simply limit themselves to reproducing the regulations contained in the Spanish law on equality. Cross-curricular studies, as pointed out by Larumbe (2012) and Saldaña (2011), are supposed to mean that a gender perspective will be introduced as the main strand in the design of programmes, systems of assessment and academic structures. That is, they should run across the entire structure of a degree, both in objectives and in competences, in modules and in courses, in curricula, in assessment criteria for learning and in the system for evaluating the quality of the degree.

### **3. Conclusion**

It is true that society is facing the great challenge of eradicating certain stereotypes and of promoting conditions for equality between women and men to be real and effective. Educating in and for equality cannot be attained automatically in a context that is still shaped by these stereotypes and by a male-centred culture. Education alone cannot make inequalities disappear, but it has a crucial part in reducing them (López Muñoz, 2012). This leads to the decisive role that universities can play as a motor of change in society through the three fundamental strands of education, research and innovation. Education is one of the basic strategies for achieving significant advances in equality. However, it must be an innovative education, which involves the transmission of values permitting the building-up or perfecting of people's ethical faculties and must serve to attain the ideals of universality and equality. As noted by Tamayo-Haya (2011), this education should be informed but critical, reasoned, with useful and participatory abilities. The role of universities should be to become in this way active agents in striving for equality. Innovation is mostly associated with technological matters, but social innovation is also necessary. In any case, institutionalization of these lines of research and of appropriate teaching would be a policy action matching up to recently passed legislation. As pointed out by Mora and Pujal (2009), the problem is to specify what is meant by the incorporation of a gender perspective and what benchmarks would allow it to be stated whether or not it has been achieved. Hence it would be advisable to establish a system of indicators ensuring its effective inclusion and consideration on the part of agencies evaluating degrees and other qualifications, whether in ANECA (the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation) or in the Spanish autonomous regions.

For the moment, rather than authentic incorporation of a gender perspective, what is happening is an institutionalization of gender studies. As stated by Palomar Vereá (2005), there is a confusion of the occurrence of isolated specific instances with the true putting in place of a gender perspective. Specialized cases have a symbolic function: to act as the evidence that an institution requires in order to prove how much importance it sets on the gender perspective. They are a part of "what every good university should have". Nevertheless, their existence is not true proof of incorporation of this perspective. Moreover, it is in the culture of academic institutions where the greatest obstacles to achieving the objective proposed are to be found.

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